

"It was a great sorrow then?" he said wistfully, and his eyes dwelt searchingly on her beautiful face as he asked the question. She was looking away through the western window to the woods, kindled into a ruddy flame by the glory of the dying day.

"It was a blow, Will, a fierce and terrible blow, which seemed to slay me. I cannot tell you just how I feel. Sometimes I do not understand myself," she said dreamily.

"If you could tell me, dear, perhaps it would relieve you. Aunt Rachel told me that you had never spoken of it to her. It is not always well to shut one's self up alone even with such a grief as that."

"No, it is not well, but I seemed to want to think, and think, until I found out just where I stood. It was all so hurried and sudden, Will, even before he went away. I did not seem quite to realize what I had done. There were even times when I feared I had been too hurried. When I hear mamma speaking about her own marriage, and how she went to India on a few days' notice, I wonder. Am I so different from other women, or is it that I am only more slow of thought and decision? I could not, at least I do not think I could have gone out to the Cape if I had been asked to do it when they went away."

"Why not? Did you not care for poor Raybourne, Evelyn?"

"Yes—but—it seems to me that one has to think a long time, and be very sure. Marriage involves so much. There are fearful risks in it. Those who marry ought to know each other so well that there can be no risk of disappointment after."

Will Ayre turned his head away for a moment, and Evelyn wondered what were his thoughts.

"Are you shocked and horrified at me, Cousin Will?" she asked quickly, yet with a most perfect confidence. Never in all the years of their sweet cousinly intimacy had he once misunderstood or misjudged her.

"No. I was only thinking. Evelyn, tell me more. I want to know just how you and my mother stand to each other. I see when you are both here with me that you seem to be at home with each other, but I want to know the innermost."

"There is no innermost, except what you see. I have had many lessons here, Cousin Will. You have taught me what, please God, I shall never forget, but among them all, I hope I have been truly and clearly shown the wrong which can be done in the world by prejudice and hard judgment."

"You mean that my mother has misjudged you and Aunt Rachel. I know she has—"

"I did not mean that, Will, although there may be truth in that too. I mean that never in all the world has there been a woman more misjudged than your mother has been by me. I used to feel fearfully bitter against her, Will. I could ask her forgiveness for it now on my dying knees."

"I love my mother dearly, Evelyn, but I cannot say she was kind to Aunt Rachel. Her prejudice against you has been one of the bitterest sorrows of my life."

"I am glad it has all been cleared up now, Will," the girl answered softly. "I used to think that if Aunt Emily could only know a little of mamma as we know her, how different everything would be—"

"She will know her now. She is learning to love her, I can see," replied the Squire, quietly. "It will be a fearful trial for my mother to leave Studleigh, Evelyn. I do not know where she can fix her home."

"What relations have you at Portmayne Castle now, Will?"

"My Uncle Fulke and his wife. They have a large family. It is out of the question that my mother could ever return there, nor will she care to live in the Dower House here when the new heir enters into possession."

"How calmly you speak of it all," cried Evelyn, with quivering lip. "You think of everything, of everyone. I wonder if there is one selfish thought in your heart. Mamma says every day you are so like your father that it breaks her heart—"

"It is the finest tribute, the only one I desire from those who loved him, and love me, Evy," said the Squire, with a placid smile.

After a little silence he turned from his couch and looked her full in the face.

"We have talked a great deal, Evelyn, but have never touched upon the point which is uppermost in my mind, though we have been very near it," he said, and his own face flushed deeply. "Has my mother said anything to you? She knows what has been in my mind for days—"

"No, she has said nothing. Tell me what you mean, cousin," Evelyn said, quietly.

"I scarcely dare, but I will, because I know your wide sympathy and your largeness of heart. Will you take my name, Evelyn, before I die?"

The girl's work fell from her nerveless hands, and she grew pale to the very lips.

"I do not think I understand you," she said with difficulty; but even while she spoke the truth flashed upon her clear as the noonday sun.

"It is a fearful thing to ask, a sacrifice of such magnitude that I do not dare, when I look at your beauty and think what life may yet hold for you, to anticipate your answer. I see you know what I mean, but before you speak let me say something, let me try and explain away the reasons why a man, dying, as I am, should dare to think of such a thing."

She drooped her head, and her hands played nervously with the gay-coloured silks on her lap, but she spoke no word.

"I do not want to say a word against Clem, honest fellow."

"You know very well, Will, that Clem would insist on Aunt Emily living in Studleigh just as she chose," Evelyn interrupted, quickly.

"It is not that, Evelyn. I have no fear whatever but that Clem will do what is just and true, after his own generous heart. But he has no desire for a country life; you have heard him say so dozens of times. He will always be a soldier and a rover, and so the place and the people will suffer."

"And what do you think I could do for them?" the girl asked in the same still, passionless voice.

"The part of the estate which is not entailed would be yours. It includes Pine Edge, and you would live there, not all the year, but sometimes, and could thus take some interest in the place."

"But your mother?"

"My mother's fortune is very ample. In any case she wishes me to bequeath all my money to you. I have done so absolutely; but, if you think you could agree to take my name, it would be sweet for me to think you had a right to it all, the right of a wife. I think that going through this simple ceremony a few hours before I die, Evelyn, would scarcely hurt your prospects. It is a strange, wild whim, perhaps; one of the vagaries of a sick man's fancy. But it is my mother's desire and mine. If out of your sweet compassion you could make up your mind to do this thing it would give me the greatest happiness the world can hold."

Evelyn Ayre sat in deep silence for a moment, with her face hidden, and then, without a word spoken, rose up and glided from the room.

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.—TILL DEATH DO US PART.

The Squire was not long left alone. He was still agitated with the excitement of what had just passed, when his mother, after a vain attempt to snatch a few moments needed sleep, came upstairs.

"I thought Evelyn was here, William," she said, when she opened the door and found him alone.

"She was here. She has not long gone. Have you had a rest mother?"

"A rest, but not a sleep. How hot you are," she said, as she laid her hand on his brow. "You seem quite excited. Is it possible, Will, that you have spoken to your cousin about what we talked of yesterday?"

"Yes, I have spoken."

"And what did she say. Has she left you in anger, Will?"

"Oh, no, I think not! Evelyn is never angry," he answered, brightly. "I do not suppose she will consent. It is a great deal to ask, mother—"

too much—from a young girl like Evelyn, with life all before her."

"I do not know. She has a high ideal of life's purposes. She believes we should always consider others first. If the mere taking of your name would make you happier while you are with us, I do not think she would hesitate, dear."

"There speaks the mother," replied Will, with a smile of love. "Let us not speak any more about it. It is I who am selfish, seeking to satisfy a sick man's fancy."

"I do not see it in that light, Will," said the fond mother, rebelliously. "It is to benefit her ultimately. It will give her a great position."

"Not so very great since Clement's wife will be mistress of the old house. Sometimes one feels this law of primogeniture to be something of a hardship," said the Squire, musingly. "Mother, will you admit that I was not mistaken in my high opinion of our kinsfolk?"

"I will admit everything, Will. I am a humbled and repentant woman. I have something to ask your Aunt Rachel's forgiveness for yet; but every time I see her my courage fails me. It was a cruel thing I did, making them leave Pine Edge; I may confess my true reason now, Will, since circumstances have strangely changed. I saw the beauty of her little girl; I feared if you were allowed to grow up together you would have become attached to each other, and then the thought was perfectly intolerable to me. How swift is retribution after all! It is the very thing I desire now with all my heart."

"You do love Evelyn, then?"

"I do. It would be impossible to be beside so sweet and beautiful a character and not love her," she answered, generously. "I have, by my own fault, been a miserable woman all my days, trying with my weak, selfish hands to control destiny, the privilege of the Creator alone. Oh, my son, I have suffered too, and yet in the midst of all my suffering, I would not have things other than they are. I feel strangely calm and resigned, as if I could bear anything and keep still."

Will Ayre looked up at the beautiful face with ineffable love in his own. She had greatly changed. The freshness of her beauty was long since gone, and she looked her years to the full. The bright hair, which had been a dream of loveliness in her husband's eyes so long ago, had lost its lustre, and was almost grey; her eyes were dimmed by many tears, and by the strain of many an anxious vigil, but there was upon that face now a serene and perfect peace, a subdued and wistful tenderness a thousand times more winning than the pride of her early beauty; because it told of a heart gradually weaned from the sordid interests of self, and awakened to the richer meanings of life. It had been a long transition, long and trying, not only to herself, but to the others; but it was over now, and Lady Emily had reached the height of true womanhood. And so, for her, sorrow and disappointments had had their benign uses.

Meanwhile, in the room set apart for her, Evelyn was kneeling by the open window with her hands clasped, her heart in a strange tumult. The certainty that her cousin loved her was no surprise to her; but that he should have told her so, and asked her at the eleventh hour to be his wife, placed her in a peculiar and trying position. She felt neither horrified nor angry. Only a vast compassion filled her soul, and a keen appreciation of his unselfishness and generous motives. She was still occupied with these strange comminglings of thoughts and feelings when a low and hesitating knock came to the door, followed by her aunt's voice.

"It is I, Evelyn. May I come in?"

"Surely, Aunt Emily."

The girl sprang up and held open the door.

"My son has sent me to you, Evelyn. Do not let what he has said drive you away from us," said Lady Emily, hurriedly. "Think no more about it, my love. It cannot make much difference to him now, and I think it has relieved him that he has spoken out frankly to you. He has loved you all his life. Think what it must have been to him to keep silence so long, and don't be very hard in your judgment."